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AUTHOR DeStefano, Johanna S.
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ABSTRACT

After discussing the relatively recent nature of research on women's language, and the lack of an integrating framework for such research, the studies in this field are reviewed. Specific topics considered include the use of standard or prestige forms, phonology, syntax, lexicon, discourse-level rules and usages, and attitudes toward women's language. Suggestions are made for future research. (AA)

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Women's Language - By & About

Johanna S. DeStefano
Ohio State University

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I think it fair to state that linguistic research in women's language in American English is quite recent. Specific questions are now beginning to be addressed in the seventies although some older studies may have mentioned in passing details which were noted by the researchers studying other questions about language variation. Unfortunately I see some very clear reasons why this type of language variation research has only begun to surface. One reason is due to the history of research in the field of linguistics and to the field's development. The study of language variation in the sense of American sociolinguistics is itself of relatively recent vintage - and it hasn't been merely old wine in new bottles. With work by scholars such as Jean Berko-Gleason, Susan Ervin-Tripp, Charles Ferguson, Joshua Fishman, John Gumperz, Dell Hymes, William Labov, and Roger Shuy (to name only some), languages including American English and some of its major varieties such as Black English have been studied from the standpoint of stress on variation and not just on the formal characteristics of the language of an ideal speaker-hearer.

But, again, the books written about sociolinguistics which are not edited compilations of individual pieces of research or essays but which are attempts at synthesizing the field are of recent origin. Joshua Fishman's Sociolinguistics and Dell Hymes' Foundations in

Sociolinguistics both have recent copyrights. We are also faced with an active but just beginning construction of a theoretical framework for language variation. Such theory development is crucial to the viable development of a field as, without it, data can be collected but barely interpreted. And the interpretation, rather than mere description, is where a major scholarly contribution lies.

So with a relatively recently developing field, certain areas of inquiry about language variation are going to be not as heavily stressed as others, partly out of sheer lack of time. Perhaps women's language falls into this category. Certainly in American English the formal differences, for example, are not nearly as striking as they are, say, in modern Japanese, Gros Ventre, or in some other languages. Since formal differences often tend to be those charactersitics noted by linguists, the relative lack of them may mean other varieties with greater differences are studied earlier. It certainly seems this is one factor in the study of women's American English.

But the reasons why for the relative recentness of women's language studies - and their attendent "scatteredness" of research questions - are far more complex than formal linguistic emphasis or the lack thereof. One of the basic tenents of sociolinguistics is that social structure and culture influence the language. It also follows that cultural and social priorities influence to a certain extent what questions are asked about language. You'll remember that a fair amount of the early transformational -

generative theoretical development and research was funded by the Armed Forces who were and are still interested in computer translation of "crucial" foreign languages. And it is fairly obvious that much of the research in American English variation in the language variation in the United States was due to a reordering of social priorities. Certain "subordinate" groups such as blacks and Chicanos began to claim their share of society - e.g. recognition in economic and cultural terms. Witness the emphasis now on bidialectical and bilingual education. This is a major switch from, say, ten years ago when American Indians and Spanish speaking children were literally forbidden to speak their native language in the school. And there is increased emphasis on a "student's right to his/her own dialect."

Similarly, but even more recently, women in the United States have been insisting on recognition for their contributions and role in society. With organization and awareness comes this insistence. And with it comes research into various aspects of being a woman in this society. Research in women's language is also aided by the fact that there are a fair number of relatively prestigous and research oriented women in the field of linguistics. It's interesting to note - and obvious in the bibliography - that the majority of seminal papers on women's American English have been written by women, while the same claim cannot be made for Black English or for most American Indian languages.

These various studies follow many of the same parameters of wider sociolinguistic research - mostly descriptive studies with relatively little theoretical development. However, there is, in some studies, a somewhat obvious attempt to influence attitudes through language change - e.g. decrease interest in the marital status of women by the use of Ms. Perhaps this is an obvious dissatisfaction with the nature of much sociolinguistic research which tends to test the parameters of social and cultural influence on language. I sense in some writing an impatience with society influencing language and a somewhat Whorfian but ultimately political desire for vice-versa - language to influence social mores and beliefs. Sexism is as political a word as racism, but it hasn't yet achieved the status of the latter.

Since a truly cogent framework is lacking when reviewing the research on women's American English - reflecting the field of sociolinguistic research - I've decided to take a rather traditionally linguistic approach in this review of the literature and first review, briefly, the literature extant as to the forms of women's American English, then usage, and finally all too skimpy data from attitudes research. I'll also try to sketch some kind of overview of the type of research done and of the recurrent hypotheses emerging, rather than merely enumerating details of individual studies.

Forms of American English

Although the following data come from a British study, I reviewed it because the author's findings also hold for what we know about women's American English and afford an overview of phonology, syntax and semantics in the sense of lexicon. Trudgill (1972) found, in his survey of urban British English used in Norwich, England, that his women informants used more "prestige" forms than did the men in his sample. These phological, syntactic and lexical "prestige" forms appeared not only more frequently but also in a broader range of social situations in women's speech. Conklin (1973) reports this as well for women in the United States. She comments "American women tend to be more 'standard' in certain situations." (p. 8) Standard and prestige can be equated in this case, and both serve to indicate the evident carefulness of women's speech.

Phonology

Here the research reports mostly quantitative differences rather than qualitative ones. "Careful pronunciation" is widely reported. Translated into linguistic terms, women are reported to more frequently realize forms such as /mæsks /and/gowsts/while men are reported to produce/mas/ or/gows/with the s slightly prolonged. Thus, women realize a consonant cluster such as /sks/or/sts/more frequently than men. (Shuy 1969)

Another widely reported more "careful" form used by women is/iŋ/ instead of/in/which is reportedly greater for men. (Fischer 1958, Shuy 1969, Trudgill 1972) Here we all recognize the school shibboleth "Don't drop the g."

Linguistically it is considered a sterotyped form of lower class speech.

Still dealing with segmental phonology, the literature also reports sociolect variation between women and men. Black English speaking women realize fewer /f/, /t/ and /ɵ/ substitutions for /o/ and /ð/ respectively than Black English speaking men do. (Wolfram 1969) Undoubtedly more quantitative differences of this sort could be reported if the data were analyzed for these differences.

Intonation (suprasegmental) differences are also reported in the literature. Pitch has been looked at by a variety of linguistics who conclude that pitch is often higher in range for women than for many men. (Brend 1971, Kramer 1974, Mattingly 1966) However, Sachs, Lieberman and Erickson (1973) conclude that higher pitch is "a linguistic convention" more than a physical reality. Women aren't constrained by physiology, they report, to have the higher pitch range that so many do. But higher pitch seems to have something to do with "sounding female."

Terminal differences have also been reported in the literature. Lakoff (1973) reports that women sometimes use a fade-rise terminal where a fade-fall is usually expected, as in an answer to a question.

Man asks: What time is dinner?

Woman answers: Six o'clock?↗

This fade-rise makes "six o'clock" a question which the male must then answer in some way such as "O.K." or "That's too early." or whatever he feels like. This tentativeness Lakoff feels is expressed in such an in-

tonation pattern is discussed more widely by her and other in syntax and lexicon both.

Syntax

Again the research reports quantitative rather than qualitative differences, but the differences reported are not particularly widespread or many in number.

Lakoff (1973), in her classic piece of self-examination research, argues that women use more tag questions than men do. She reports women saying things like "It's a beautiful day, isn't it?" or "That's a fine baby, isn't it?" She feels this form expresses a greater tentativeness on the part of women; they require some support for their view rather than making a flat assertion such as "That's a fine baby." It could also be viewed as a politeness formula. When you make a statement into a question, you give another person an obvious chance to respond, which an assertion may not presuppose. Questions obviously presuppose answers of some sort; statements as a class do not to the same degree. So if you want to involve others in a speech act, a formulaic question presupposing a formulaic answer such as "Oh yes, isn't she?" (a question or statement?) could be a polite way to do so. It's also polite to ask other's opinions rather than merely rendering your own.

Key (1970) reports on the use of intensifiers as part of syntax while Lakoff (1973) puts them in lexicon. Wherever they go, women are noted

to use more intensifiers such as so, quite and such than men. "It's so cute." and "That's quite all right." supposedly appear more in women's American English. Dudley Haskell, in conversation, has noted that he, as a man, feels somewhat uncomfortable using those intensifiers in those ways. What intensifiers presuppose hasn't been fully worked out yet, but it would seem necessary to analyze their presuppositions in order to determine the function of greater intensification in women's language. Another question we must ask is what do the intensifiers co-occur with? That might well give some clues as to their functions. For example, we are comfortable - as women - with: It's so cute. But are we with: It's so damnable. I don't think so. Intensifiers may prove to be quite topically constrained.

Syntactic hypercorrections are also reported in the research. One of the most common is the use of the nominative case pronouns in the object case. We thus hear the infamous "You gave it to Mary and I." and "You gave it to June and she." According to Labov (1966) and Levine and Crockett (1966), women realize more of these hypercorrections in their speech than men do. This phenomenon is also a class and/or sociolect difference as well in that black ghetto women and lower class women tend to use more hypercorrections than middleclass women. So we begin to see variation in women's language depending on sociolect and/or class, but this topic is little discussed in the literature.

An interesting parellel to the reported greater use of hypercorrect

forms is the also reported finding that women are less likely to use socially stigmatized(class marked) forms such as multiple negatives or subject-verb agreements like "I done it." (Shuy 1969, Trudgill 1972, Wolfram 1969) So women tend to speak more "normatively", as it were, than men do; they more highly approximate social norms for speech. This finding of "careful speech" in syntax is supported by Trudgill's findings on British women's speech.(1972) "Carefulness" seems to be emerging as a characterstic of women's American English. Do we find this in lexical use as well? I think we do, but by subsuming the notion of being careful into the broader framework of women's place in society.

LEXICON

In the current analyses of women's language forms, lexicon is the area for which most sex differences are reported. Furthermore, data are reported both for lexical items used by women and about women. So a new dimension enters current research - how are women talked about? Finally, researchers begin to say that with lexicon there is some evidence that there are both quantitative and qualitative differences between women's and men's language. Perhaps the most popular example is that of color terms. Women are attributed with a color vocabulary that contains items such as azure and turquoise; men are thought, by and large, not to have these words in their lexicon.

These color terms are part of the lexicon attributed as women's -

part of the language used by women. (Lakoff 1973) Lakoff also discussed women's use of non-referent particles like "oh dear" and "fudge" as expletives. She makes a convincing case that this set of expletives may be a qualitative difference between women's and men's language; men simply don't say "oh dear" but instead have a lexical set which is viewed by society as much more forceful.

Which brings us into the area of swear words. Lakoff (1973) and Conklin (1973) cite differences in women's and men's swearing both in terms of different words used by women and in terms of women using them less frequently. However, I suspect such use is age-graded among women with some younger ones using perhaps the full range of "men's" swear words almost as frequently as men. Certainly this is not generally true of my generation, but I get reports from university undergraduate women that their swearing repertoire is extensive and extensively used as well.

Lexicon used about women - or females to broaden the scope to include girls - is widely reported in the literature, if there is any such thing as wide reporting of women's language. Numbers of terms used to refer to females have been compared to those used to refer to males as a type of index of societal importance and role possibilities. Nilsen (1973) found from her survey of dictionaries only 132 terms used to refer to females as opposed to 385 terms used for males. This particular finding is substantiated by further research by her plus that reported by Lakoff (1973) and Key (1970) on the use of he and nouns such

as man and mankind generically to refer to both sexes. However, Stanley, in a paper given at this conference, presented the thesis that the generic use of the third-person singular pronoun and nouns such as man do not, in fact, include females even though it is commonly asserted they do. So women have fewer words to refer to them and also are referred to as he and man.

The research also reports on specific terms used to refer to women and analyzes to some extent the meaning "field" of these terms. For example, Lakoff (1973) analyzes the use of lady, girl, widow and mistress, deciding that most uses are actually denigrating to women. Stanley (1972) found over 200 words used by men to refer to women who sell themselves or give themselves away.

A conclusion emerging in much of the research on the lexicon used about women is that these lexical items indicate relative powerlessness for women in the society. Certainly he used generically would seem to be an indication for such a conclusion. Another minor signal is the lack of semantic equivalence between words such as bachelor and spinster. Spinster, according to Lakoff (1973) has negative connotations which bachelor doesn't have. A spinster is a woman who has somehow "missed the boat" when it comes to getting married. She didn't get a man, but a bachelor hasn't missed the boat because he didn't get a women - a wife. Men can remain unmarried, but not women without somehow being devalued.

This powerlessness which is described in the literature on women's American English fits with the "carefulness" and "politeness" also reported for women's speech. Generally, if one is relatively powerless, one is careful and polite in dealing with those who have the power. This phenomenon can be seen in Black English speakers' linguistic behavior as well. Such a set of hypotheses need to be more clearly formulated and tested but the preliminary data seem to indicate a fruitful approach would be to develop the notions of powerlessness and politeness.

LANGUAGE USE

Another major area of research into women's language is this area of use, sometimes also called discourse analysis. Whatever the name, the entire area suffers from the lack of a cohesive theoretical framework or even extensive conceptualization, and at this point in time, the research in this area isn't too widespread. Conklin says "No major study of language use in natural social groups has attempted to study women's speech." (1973, 11) Obviously much research needs to be done in this area to map the differences between what men and women say to whom when and how. A tipoff as to the potential afforded by such study comes from the same type of research into the use of Black English which is proving more fruitful than a mere look at the formal characteristics of the sociolect to differences between this variety and others of American English. We know something now about rapping, shucking, jiving, playing the dozens, and

characteristics and demonstrates common behavioral phenomena. Witness the growth of the concept of a culture of poverty which is beginning to be applied worldwide.

Certainly the hypotheses of women's relative powerlessness comes up again as an explanation for certain types of language use. Lakoff (1973) and Kramer (1974) report that women use both more questions and request forms than men do. This doesn't refer to just the tag question but to all question forms. The request forms are ones like "Please help me with the groceries." and "Help me with the groceries, won't you.", rather than the more male "Help me with the groceries" or "Hey, give me a hand here." The implication drawn from the greater frequency of use of these forms by women is that individuals who feel they have a fair amount of control over the world don't have to ask as many questions or request so much but can, instead, order others, demand, and assert through their language. These persons are largely men in this society. Women, it's postulated, have less control so must be more tentative (questions) and submissive (request rather than demand). Social position and perception of that position thus are mirrored in language use.

Conversation modes have also been studies slightly. Kester (1972), Soskin and John (1963), and Swacker (1973) all report in their research that, contrary to the stereotype of the woman "gossip" that men actually talk more than women. This holds with conversation in a sexually mixed group and with a female-male dyad. Kramer (1974) reports that not only do men talk more but that they also interrupt more than women do. Finally,

although it's not a report on American English, I think the research done by Höweler & Vrolijk (1970) is important enough to mention here. They found in Holland that men are talked to more by both men and women. So men seem to call the shots in conversations, at least so far indicated in the results.

Perhaps this is partly what Lakoff (1973) has in mind when she said that conversational rules differ for women and men. There may be somewhat different set of presuppositions about what is socially appropriate language behavior, sets which "allow" men more latitude and dominance than women in conversations. I'm reminded of a strategy a woman graduate student in Educational Administration told me about. All Ph. D. level students in that department are in seminars together, with her as the only woman in one group. She was telling me that, first of all, the men control the direction of the conversation by interrupting one another with entry formulae such as "Yes, but ..." or "That's fine. However ..." or "Wait a minute." She felt uncomfortable about interrupting (as reported) but finally started to because otherwise she literally didn't get a word in. When she did this, the men kept right on talking. Being interrupted by a woman was perceived quite differently than by a man. She wasn't one to give up, so she interrupted and kept on talking until finally the men would quit. Toward the end, she said they were beginning to treat her verbally like the other men - by stopping talking. But an interesting point is that at first her interruptions were ignored. Her verbal behavior was judged quite differently from the men's by the men, apparently indicating there are some different discourse appropriateness rules operating.

Attitudes Toward Women's Language

But another factor also may be in operating in the above case - the attitudes of men (and women as well) about women's language. Language is judged by listeners for appropriateness to the roles the speaker and listener have in relationship to one another. Both Kramer (1974) and Lakoff (1973) suggest that, for women's language, this appropriateness is judged accroding to a cultural set of sterotypes about sex-linked behavioral appropiateness. Language must then "mirror" the social position as sterotyped by society. In my opinion, stereotypes and their influence play a crucial role in women's language behavior; since women are more powerless in this society, judgments based on stereotypes may well be more severe on them. Keep them in their place"; strong judgment by stereotype can serve to do just that. Unfortunately, very little research is reported on attitudes toward women's American English, but more is crucial. If we are, in fact, constrained in what we as women can say to whom when and how, we need to know what the constraints are and what their impact is on how we function as productive human beings. What do such constraints do to us socially, cognitively and emotionally? In order to answer these $64,000,000 questions, we need to know what sex-role stereotypes are in this society, what attitudes toward women's language are, what the links between the two are, and what the combined effects on half the population of the United States are.

CONCLUSION

So where are we and where can we go with research on women's American English? It reminds me of the folk saying about days of birth that "Saturday's child has far to go." This research has far to go. At this point in time, it's difficult to distinguish between stereotypes and behavior because so little is known to counteract those stereotypes of folk linguistics. But reviewing the research done, we can obviously extend descriptive research on the forms of women's American English: phonology, syntax and semantics. And descriptive research on language use (insert whichever term you prefer) and on attitudes toward that usage is virtually nonexistant.

Secondly, I would like to suggest that research is needed into stereotypes about women's language, held by both women and men. Then we can determine the differences between those stereotypes and what women actually say, how they say it, when, and how they feel about the differences.

Above I've indicated the need for data on adult women's language. One major reason is that it thus provides a "benchmark" or "norm" against which to compare developmental data. For example, how do girls learn to talk like women? First we need to know what it is to talk like a woman. And we need to know the parameters of the developmental sociolinguistic process for girls. Also we need data on the

development of attitudes toward women's language.

Finally, the research badly needs a sociolinguistic theoretical framework to operate within. Theory generates hypotheses, and hypotheses are crucial to the collection and interpretation of data. Fortunatley some hypotheses are emerging from research which can "connect upward" in the theoretical hierarchy to broader generalizations. One of the most powerful is that women's language reflects powerlessness, submissiveness, passivity. The proposed powerlessness has been connected with phonological variables, syntactic forms, and lexicon as well as usage. Certainly the question of power is widely discussed in other fields so could be developed interdisciplinarily.

Another hypotheses is also beginning to emerge - that stereotypes about language behavior do not match actual language behavior but may affect it and attitudes about it. Stereotypes, too, have been researched and developed in other disciplines.

Ultimately we need to find out not just what is women's language but, more importantly, what are its effects on women - on society. Fortunately many of the current researchers are definetly asking that question about effects.

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